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Spy story

A recent Soviet defector has provided an interesting footnote to Central Intelligence Agency Director Stansfield Turner's much-publicized and controversial refusal to rule out the possibility that his agency would use American journalists for future covert operations.

According to Ilya Dzhirkvelov, a former Soviet foreign correspondent who defected to Britain last month, all Soviet news correspondents are at least to some extent agents of the KGB, the Soviet secret police. All, that is, are expected to, and do, report all their conversations with Westerners and foreign government officials back to Moscow.

Dzhirkvelov's account of his own career offers a revealing case in point. He began as a full-time KGB intelligence officer; then, in 1956, was made a correspondent with Tass, the official Soviet news agency, and served in Zanzibar and the Sudan during the 60s and 70s.

While stationed in the Sudan, he met every morning, promptly at 9 a.m., with a regular KGB agent to relay all the details of his conversations with Sudanese officials. He also undertook intelligence-gathering missions of his own.

In 1977 he was made information officer at the World Health Organization in Geneva,

where he was informed upon arrival that his work would be judged, not by its contribution to the United Nations, but by the amount of information it produced for the KGB.

Nor was he in an unusual position. Geneva, he told the London Times, "is a huge center of international espionage, the Tangiers of our time." All Soviet citizens there, though supposedly working for international agencies, are actually KGB infiltrators who report on all their conversations with Westerners.

This all-encompassing spy network does produce some ironic results, however. Because all these agents try to send back information tailored to suit the current Kremlin viewpoint, the Soviet leadership is deluged with a mass of "disinformation" which Dzhirkvelov says gives them a distorted picture of world events.

"More often than not we heard the news from the BBC rather than our own correspondents," he says, "and when our people do file we always check what they send against Reuters to see what is really happening."

There's a warning for Turner in all this. If he follows the Soviet example too far, he might end up having to cross-check all his journalist-agents' reports against Pravda, the official Soviet newspaper.